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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from a 5-year study of the impact of educational reform on Texas students who are in situations that put them at risk of school failure or dropping out. Data were derived from three sources: a statewide survey of high school principals; a longitudinal analysis that tracked 1,800 at-risk high school students from school year 1988-89 through 1992-93; and case studies of eight high schools. The study focused on five specific policies that were implemented as part of a larger education-reform movement that began in Texas in 1983: increased graduation requirements, the exit-level competency test for graduation, restrictions on participation in extracurricular activities, an attendance policy limiting the number of allowable absences, and a drivers' license law requiring proof of enrollment to obtain a license. School staff expressed predominantly positive attitudes toward the reform policies in general. However, they were less positive about implementation and impact of the specific reform policies. They expressed two primary concerns--the accuracy of the process for identifying students at risk, and the differential impact of polices on identified at-risk students and other students. Recommendations include: (1) Continue to analyze the concept of students at-risk to improve its usefulness in directing limited education resources; (2) provide school districts with greater discretion in directing resources and services to students by making the state at-risk criteria optional; (3) continue to provide technical support and training to school district staff in effective risk identification and existing practices; (4) continue to closely monitor the differential impact of state-level policies on students at risk versus other students; and (5) continue to emphasize remedial and compensatory programs that accelerate instruction. (LMI)

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Final Report of a Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students At Risk in Texas

March 1994

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Final Report of a Study of

The Impact of Educational Reform on Students At Risk in Texas

This report was prepared by the Texas Education Agency's Office of Policy Planning and Evaluation in an effort to provide information about the impact of educational reform on students at risk of school failure or dropping out. The Texas Education Agency appreciates the efforts of the many local school district staff and students who participated in data collection and analysis. We especially appreciate the efforts of Michael Baizerman, Center for Youth Development and Research, University of Minnesota, and Greg Getz, University of Houston, who provided substantial assistance and guidance in the development and implementation of this study.

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The purpose of identifying students as at risk is to signal school districts that specialized programs and services are to be provided to students in order to promote their academic success and prevent school failure.

State Board of Education rules on alternatives to social promotion
(Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part II, §75.195.)

Final Report On A Study of The Impact of Educational Reform on Students At Risk in Texas

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a five-year study of the impact of educational reform on students who are in situations that put them at risk of school failure or dropping out. The study consisted of three components: (1) a statewide survey of high school principals, (2) a longitudinal component that tracked 1,800 at-risk high school students for four years, and (3) case studies of eight high schools. The study focused on five specific policies that were part of a larger education reform movement that began in Texas in 1983. The policies studied were

- — increased graduation requirements
- — the exit-level competency test for graduation
- — restrictions on participation in extracurricular activities, or no pass/no play policy
- — the attendance policy limiting the number of absences allowed in order to receive course credit
- — the driver's license law requiring proof of enrollment to obtain a driver's license

Responses from school staff to general questions about the reform policies were predominantly positive, indicating that conceptually the policies have been well received. Responses to questions regarding the implementation and impact of specific reform policies were less positive. The three components of the study point to two major concerns underlying many of the responses.

The first concern is related to the process of identifying students as at risk. The purpose of identifying students as being at risk of school failure or dropping out is to signal school administrators, counselors, and teachers that these students may need specialized programs or services to promote their academic success. As applied by school districts, the state at-risk criteria, even when expanded with local criteria, do not seem to master the complexity of the process of identification and categorization of risk as applied to learners. The mandated criteria result in large numbers of students being identified as at risk, yet many dropouts from the schools in this study were not identified or provided services before dropping out.

The second concern is that the policies seem to have a differential impact on identified at risk and other students, sometimes exacerbating existing differences with the introduction of new demands on the student population without appropriate support. Policy outcomes cannot be evaluated independent of either the way the policies are implemented or the interventions provided for students. School districts are required to provide academic options and services to students identified as being at risk in their current situation. The types of services provided may include alternative education programs, retention, counseling, peer tutoring, or referral to service providers outside the school. The study suggests that the types of interventions provided could be a mediating factor on the impact of the policies on students at risk. Research shows that it is

extremely difficult for state-level policy to change practice at the local level. Variability in both the definition and implementation of the reforms, as well as the types of interventions provided, were observed in this study.

Recommendations

■ Continue to analyze the concept of students at risk to improve its usefulness in directing limited education resources.

■ Provide school districts greater discretion in directing resources and services to students by making the state at-risk criteria optional.

■ Continue to provide technical support and training to school district staff in effective risk identification and exiting practices.

■ Continue to closely monitor the differential impact of state-level policies on students at risk versus other students.

■ Continue to emphasize remedial and compensatory programs that accelerate instruction.

Increased Graduation Requirements

Raising standards at the state level will not, in and of itself, improve student achievement at the local level. Increasing academic expectations and raising standards of student performance must be planned in conjunction with additional academic and related services. The study found that the increased graduation requirements did not result in improved academic achievement for students at risk who were often unable to pass the more difficult courses or transferred to below-level courses.

Recommendations

■ Provide instructional and support programs in elementary and middle school to ensure that all students enter high school adequately prepared to engage in high school level course work.

■ Promote restructuring efforts that give schools the flexibility to meet individual learning needs and increase student interest with innovative methods and course sequences.

No Pass/No Play

Students in this study who were involved in school-related activities, including doing homework, had higher grades and were less likely to drop out of school than students not involved in these activities. Although students at risk were more likely to lose eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities than other students, this had no significant effect on whether they dropped out or not. However, school administrators were concerned about potential gang recruitment of students who had lost eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities. Most school professionals supported the no pass/no play policy in general but wanted to shorten the length of time students stay out of school.

Recommendation

■ Provide opportunities for all students to participate in activities that promote affiliation with the school.

Attendance

Principals responding to the statewide survey were about evenly divided among those thinking the attendance policy decreased the likelihood of students dropping out, those thinking it increased that likelihood, and those who were neutral. Losing course credit toward the end of high school was more detrimental to students in the study than losing credit early in high school. Most of the school professionals interviewed, including those opposed to the existing attendance policy, favored the notion of minimum mandatory attendance.

Recommendation

■ Develop flexible and locally appropriate means of recovering credit for students with excessive absences, emphasizing learning outcomes and recuperating work as opposed to making up the time lost.

TEAMS and TAAS

The introduction of the statewide testing program was seen by principals as positive overall by raising standards, helping teachers assess students' needs, and triggering remediation for students performing below grade level. In 1990-91 principals were more concerned about ninth grade failures than the exit-level test. Over the course of the study, students who failed the TEAMS or TAAS were more likely to drop out than were students who did not fail. Interviews revealed that teachers are seeking multiple assessments; there seems to be a consensus in the notion that too much emphasis has been placed on the TAAS examination rather than quality teaching and learning.

Recommendation

■ Provide longer implementation periods for policy initiatives that have student consequences such as eligibility to receive a diploma, and incorporate institutional accountability measures into the Academic Excellence Indicators System and performance-based accreditation process before holding students accountable for achieving outcomes.

Driver's License Law

Principals were more likely to report that the driver's license law had no impact on school completion than any other response. By the last year of the study, most students were aware of the law and many thought it helped prevent students from dropping out. These findings are insufficient for a recommendation to either change or repeal the driver's license law.

General Recommendations

In addition to the policy-specific recommendations listed above, a series of more general recommendations follow. Some of these recommendations are related to the policy-making process. Others relate to activities that span all the policies, such as technical assistance and professional development. Finally, there are recommendations that flow from findings not directly related to the policies under study, such as the changing role of school guidance counselors.

■ Develop a formal process for periodically reconsidering reform policies so that reform can become ongoing.

■ Foster efforts that give local flexibility to schools with high proportions of students at risk to best meet the needs of these students.

■ Examine the multiple roles of counselors and identify duties that may interfere with the time needed to provide developmentally appropriate counseling services to students.

■ Link instructional services with support services such as counseling, transportation, health services, day care, and tutoring for students at risk of dropping out of school.

■ Provide staff development for high school staff that increases their knowledge and use of developmentally appropriate practices through implementation of the recommendations for professional growth and development from the State Board of Education Task Force on High School Education.

Introduction

This report presents findings from a five-year study of the impact of educational reform on students who are in situations that put them at risk of school failure or dropping out. *Preliminary Findings: A Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on At-Risk Students in Texas,* published in January 1991, summarized findings and presented preliminary recommendations from the first two years of the study. *An Interim Report on a Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations in Texas,* published in May 1992, presented findings from the third year of the study.

For purposes of this study the terms "at risk" and "regular" were selected, although alternative terminology is available in the literature ("underserved," "slow learners"). Use of such descriptors is in no way intended to communicate a belief that students described as at risk are in any way deficient individuals. Any choice of terms is controversial because it singles out the student's situation versus integrating a holistic perspective that includes viewing the educational system as at risk as well. This report attempts to go beyond the terms by focusing instead on the issues associated with their use and definition.

The study had three components. The first component was a longitudinal study of 1,800 Texas high school students identified as being at risk of school failure or dropping out, 80 percent of whom participated in extracurricular activities. Data were collected regarding the impact of reform policies on this sample of students (the increased graduation requirements, the attendance policy, the no pass/no play policy, the exit-level examination requirement, and the driver's license law). The second component of the evaluation consisted of a case study. Interviews were held each year for four years with campus principals, at-risk coordinators, counselors, teachers, and students in eight participating schools. Structured school questionnaires were used to obtain data about each school and the effects of the reform policies on both regular students and students at risk. The third component consisted of the distribution of a statewide survey to all high school principals in the fall of 1990. Data were collected regarding opinions about the perceived impact of the selected reform policies on both regular students and students at risk. Information pertaining to the change in the allocation of resources since implementation of the education reforms, including implementation and maintenance of programs and services for students at risk and the distribution of responsibility for at-risk youth, was also obtained.

A central theme to this study is the urgency in understanding the consequences of reform on Texas high school students as a whole, and more specifically on students in situations that put them at risk. The lack of information regarding the impact of certain laws and policies has prevented an adequate assessment of the impact of specific reforms.

This study addresses this information need. In combination, the three study components provide detailed information regarding opinions about reform, implementation issues surrounding reform, and the distinctive impact of educational reform on students at risk in Texas. The study proposes directions for future research and recommended actions for improvement.

Historical Background of Educational Reform in Texas

The policies under study were part of a larger statewide educational reform movement that began in Texas in 1983 when the legislature, State Board of Education, and Texas Education Agency introduced a standardized curriculum and a variety of other changes to the educational system. House Bill 246, enacted in January 1984, provided the legal basis for the statewide curriculum. Title 19, Chapter 75, of the *Texas Administrative Code* implements that law by specifying essential elements to be taught by every teacher and learned by every student in Texas schools. Among the changes mandated by House Bill 72, omnibus reform legislation passed the following year, were increased graduation requirements, passage of an exit-level competency test for graduation, restrictions on participation in extracurricular activities, and a limit on absences. This wave of educational reform continued during the 71st legislative session with the addition in 1989 of a law requiring proof of enrollment to obtain a driver's license and a modification of the attendance policy.

During this reform movement, one approach to raising standards for all students was to increase graduation requirements. In 1984, based on legislation passed in 1981, the board approved graduation requirements that included four years of English, two and one-half years of social studies, three years of mathematics, two years of science, and one and one-half years each of health and economics. A more rigorous grading system and the implementation of a statewide curriculum, identifying essential elements to be learned by all students, accompanied the increase in graduation requirements.

Although House Bill 72 created the five-day absence rule in 1989, the 71st legislature repealed this attendance policy two years later and replaced it with a law that required students to attend class at least 80 days during a semester to receive course credit. At the time, 80 days represented 90 percent of the school year. In 1991 the 72nd legislature lengthened the school year for students and in 1993 the attendance law was amended by the 73rd legislature to acknowledge the longer school year. To receive course credit a student must now be in attendance 90 percent of the days the class is offered.

Each district is required to appoint at least one attendance committee to hear petitions for course credit from students who have less than the required number of days of attendance. These committees can grant credit to petitioning students, who in turn can appeal unfavorable committee decisions to the local school board. The law also directs local school boards to adopt policies that establish alternatives for students to recoup credit lost due to absences, and to develop guidelines based on State Board of Education rules that define extenuating circumstances. Finally, in 1991 the compulsory school attendance age was raised from 16 to 17.

Texas statute resulting from House Bill 72 requires that students take basic skills tests at certain grade levels, and that they pass an exit-level examination for graduation. Competency tests of minimum skills in reading, writing, and mathematics were to be given in the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth grades (before the 1989-90 school year students were tested in the first grade as well). The exit-level

examination was limited to mathematics and English language arts until the beginning of the 1990-91 school year, when the student testing program changed from the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills test (TEAMS) to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The TAAS testing program includes assessment of higher order thinking skills, as well as an evaluation of student writing skills at the exit level. By the 1994-95 school year, tests in science and social studies will have been phased into the TAAS criterion-referenced testing program.

The restriction on participation in extracurricular activities, or no pass/no play policy, is one of the more controversial policies in the Texas education reform movement. It requires students to pass every course during a six-week grading period in order to participate in any extracurricular activity during the following six-week grading period. The rule permits the campus principal to waive the suspension only for a student who fails a recognized honors or advanced class.

The driver's license law was passed in 1989 by the 71st Texas Legislature. To receive a driver's license, anyone under 18 who does not have a high school diploma or its equivalent must be enrolled in school and have attended school for at least 80 days in the fall or spring semester preceding their application for a license, or be enrolled in a high school equivalency program and have been enrolled at least 45 days.

Strategically these reforms were aimed at improving the overall performance of the student population by raising academic standards. Implicit in the intent of the law was reducing the dropout rate. However, the implementation of the policies may be having both positive and negative consequences for youth at risk of school failure or dropping out. The question of concern is, do state-level reform policies that raise standards for students result in greater student effort, motivation, engagement; and higher student achievement; and, consequently, higher graduation rates? At a deeper level, how do state policies change and affect local level policy, practice, and outcomes?

Need for the Study

Implementation of education reforms in Texas had not been evaluated using a statewide perspective before this study, nor had the definition and use of the term at risk been examined. Until reforms such as the attendance policy, the no pass/no play policy, the driver's license law, and the TEAMS/TAAS exit-level examination requirement are evaluated, their impact on both regular students and students at risk is indeterminate. Evaluation of the reforms and their intended and unintended effects on the academic achievement and social engagement of students at risk in the Texas public school system is of critical importance for a number of reasons. First is the time, effort, and cost associated with implementation of state-level reforms. Second is the unexplored relationship between policy formation and local educational interpretations, practices, and outcomes. Third is the potential for both positive and negative human consequences once such policies are implemented. Furthermore, a programmatic evaluation provides an avenue whereby education reforms can be refined, examined, fine-tuned, and customized to better serve all students in Texas. Ideally the dialog advocated by this study will continue to unfold into an ongoing evaluation process whereby these policies can be developed to their full potential.

Description of the Study

Triangulation was the research approach adopted for this study. That is, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the reforms. This research approach builds on an appreciation of social, structural, cultural,

and individual factors in everyday life, with particular sensitivity to how the concept of youth development is applied in schools, at home, and in the community. Ethnographic methods and cultural perspectives lead to a search for non-formal policies, understandings, and meanings of at risk as used by students, staff, faculty, and school administrators. These orientations and perspectives are gathered through the use of data collection methods such as interviews conducted with faculty and staff from participating high schools. The interview data are useful for understanding the perspectives of those most affected by the policies and their implementation, such as students, teachers, and counselors. In combination with quantitative data, this research approach led to findings and understandings that would not have been possible through the use of any single methodology. While there is an overarching set of questions posed for the study, each component approaches specific issues.

Longitudinal Component

Overall the longitudinal component sought to quantitatively assess the impact of the reforms on student achievement and dropping out. Key questions addressed were: (1) Which are the risk factors that correlate with dropping out?, (2) Do the state mandated policies mediate or moderate the magnitude of association between risk factors and dropping out?, (3) Does remedial assistance mediate or moderate the magnitude of association between risk factors and dropping out?, and (4) Do social/economic/ethnicity influence factors mediate or moderate the maginitude of association between risk factors and dropping out? The first year (1988-89) of the four-year longitudinal study consisted of collecting detailed data from the school counselor for each of the 1,800 students in the sample. The students in the sample were ninth- and tenth-grade students who were identified as being in situations that put them at risk of dropping out of school, based on state and local criteria. The students were from 50 school districts in education service center regions IV (Houston) and XX (San Antonio). Information was collected regarding attendance, test scores, enrollment in regular or below-level courses, and other detailed descriptive information.

In the second year (1989-90), information from school records for the students was again obtained from counselors. In addition, the study design called for the counselors to distribute a questionnaire to the students in the sample. An overall response rate of 65 percent was obtained from the students. This low response rate resulted from some counselors not distributing the questionnaire as well as some students not responding.

The same approach was used in the third year. Counselors provided information on approximately 1,200 students. The reduction in sample size from 1,800 to 1,200 was due mainly to students graduating, dropping out, or moving to another district that was not part of the study. As in the second year, the study design called for the counselors to distribute a questionnaire. Again, an overall response rate of 65 percent was obtained from the students.

In the fourth year the same procedures were followed. At the end of the fourth year, the number of students for whom information was available had decreased to 791. This reflects student attrition, students graduating or dropping out during the fourth year of the study, and lack of participation by districts in the study.

Case Study Component

The case study seeks to capture how the reforms have affected state/local relations and everyday consequences on school life. From the high schools participating in the longitudinal component of the study, eight were selected for a case study. Site visits were made to each of the schools by evaluation staff during the spring of 1990, the spring of 1991, the

Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations in Texas					
	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
Longitudinal Study: (1,800 ninth- and tenth-grade students)					
Counselor Questionnaire	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Student Questionnaire		✔	✔	✔	
Case Study (8 high schools):					
Campus-level Data, Staff, Faculty and Student Interviews		✔	✔	✔	✔
Principal Survey:					
Statewide High School Survey		✔			

spring of 1992, and the spring of 1993. Interviews were conducted with the campus principal, the at-risk coordinator, a counselor, and a teacher in each school. A structured group interview was conducted with two classes of eleventh-grade students in each high school. In addition, a campus data collection instrument was used to obtain information about the school and the effects of each policy on both students identified as at risk and regular students. For example, items inquired about the number of students losing credit because of attendance requirements and the number of students ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities because of the no pass/no play policy.

Principal Survey Component

The impact of the principal's leadership on school effectiveness has been well-documented in the research literature on effective schools. Administrators must insure the effective use of faculty and other resources in accomplishing school goals. As leaders, principals must display vision and management skills to maintain an environment conducive to a positive school climate and responsive to individual students' unique needs.

The school principal has a key role in implementing state education reform. In terms of recent reforms in Texas, expressed in House Bill 246 (1984) and House Bill 72 (1984), the principal must support the state policy goal of increasing student achievement, lowering the dropout rate, and serving students at risk. Principals must enforce the no pass/no play policies, administer attendance policies developed by state and local policy makers, oversee administration of the TEAMS/TAAS examination, assure that students failing the exit-level examination receive remedial instruction and assistance, and assist in enforcing the driver's license law that prohibits dropouts under age 18 from holding a Texas driver's license. The extent to which a principal exercises leadership in implementing and supporting these policies likely affects the ease with which they become norms for the school.

Because of their role in administering and enforcing these reform measures, principals are in a unique position to determine the

effectiveness of reforms on school programs and student performance. For this reason, in addition to providing a statewide perspective, the agency surveyed all Texas high school principals to determine their perceptions regarding the effects of the Texas reforms in the fall of 1990. Eighty-one percent of the high school principals in the state responded to the survey.

Use and Definition of the Term "At Risk"

State Board of Education rules on alternatives to social promotion require that students in grades 7-12 who are below the age of 21 and meet certain criteria be identified as at risk. The criteria include (1) having been retained, (2) being below grade level, (3) not mastering the TAAS, (4) being homeless, (5) optional psycho-social variables, and (6) residing in a residential placement facility. In 1993 pregnancy and parenting were added to the list of criteria.

FINDINGS

To assess the impact of reform on students identified as being in situations that put them at risk of school failure or dropping out, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of how the term "at risk" is defined at the state and local levels and how this definition interacts with identification practices at the campus and classroom levels. Defining this process is critical in understanding the differential impact of reform on students at risk.

The findings from the site visits in the case study schools substantiated responses from the interviews with district and campus staff that there are at least two conceptualizations of risk. The formal definition of being at risk is primarily based on academic performance and uses indicators such as the TAAS, grade point average, and being retained. Many schools add psycho-social variables to this list. In addition to the formal definition of at risk, counselors and teachers report a second informal definition that includes a wide range of characteristics and behaviors such as lack of parental support and alternative family living arrangements. In general, though, to those professionals who work closely with students at risk and who are in the position of having to identify these students, they are ordinary kids. Rather than serving as a way to distinguish a group of students, the concept of at risk becomes inextricably linked to individuals, their context, and persona. The common language in the schools was to individualize, see each student as a person. The staff identify students who "don't care," who are not doing their school work, or who are not serious about learning for whatever reasons. School professionals are also aware of students (usually not identified by either state or local at-risk criteria) who move into and out of risk status due to personal or family crises such as divorce, illness, or family violence.

Given their tendency to define the problem on an individual basis, those who must apply the formal, policy-based definition of at risk find that definition in conflict with their working concept of at risk. There is a general sense of lack of discretionary control on the part of school staff dealing with the students. Staff feel they have a practical grasp of the problem in contrast to the theoretical grasp they perceive in the state-mandated definition.

One purpose of identifying students as being at risk is to better allocate resources to meet students' needs in learning situations to prevent them from dropping out. This study reveals each year that many students leave school who were never identified as being at risk before having dropped out. There was no formal signal to indicate a need for reassessing educational programs or services. For example, four of the seven schools in the case study component reported that approximately half of the students who dropped of school during the 1989-90 school year were identified as being at risk before dropping out of school. It is possible that many of the students who dropped out

without being identified under the official criteria had been informally identified by school professionals.

Counselors in the longitudinal component were asked whether individual students in the sample were likely not to complete high school. As of the third year of the study, 30 percent of the students who counselors agreed would not likely graduate were reported as dropouts. Data from this component also indicate that a large percentage of dropouts did not receive any support services before dropping out. Counselors were unable to provide information regarding services offered for approximately 50 percent of the students who dropped out in 1989 and 1990. Of the remaining 50 percent of the students who dropped out, counselors reported that 65 percent had not received any support services before dropping out. Since so many students whose educational needs evidently were not being met were never flagged as having such needs, the utility of the term at risk in directing resources to students remains open to question in this study.

Two concerns regarding the definition and use of the term at risk, and the complexity of the process of identifying and exiting students from risk status, became evident in the early stages of this evaluation study. The first is that the term at risk, when applied in an educational context, is inappropriately viewed as a technical term. Although it originated as a technical term, its predictive power and accuracy in identifying potential dropouts (influenced by many conditions and variables) is a relative rather than absolute condition. Individual variability necessitates local flexibility. Districts are allowed to remove a student from the at-risk list; in practice, very few of the schools in this study appear to exercise this option. The following comments from participants illustrate this concern.

I have people that constantly come in to see me, parents, and say well why are these kids at-risk? Why? And I say that I can't give you one reason. Everyone of these kids come with so much baggage and each one of them is so different! And it depends on how many of the problems we can solve to get them through the school year. In other words, we are providing social services, health services, educational services, food services. The whole nine yards on them!... There're sometimes problems... such a multitude of them that we can't deal with them... But I can only take care of what's happening a few hours of the day. The ones we're doing most poorly with, we must be doing poorly with that gang group because I'm seeing a lot more violence.

Principal

The computer lists? No, they just take away from my counseling time. The time that we take in identifying these kids at risk is just unbelievable. It requires a lot of time. It doesn't make a difference that I take my time to identify these kids as at-risk kids because we don't have the programs or the money.

Counselor

The second concern is that the term at risk continues to be used to focus on the student to the exclusion of the education system. This focus leads to development of child-saving and crisis-oriented services rather than changes to the education system. Principals, administrators, and educators are in a constant flux of adaptation to social changes affecting the household, the community, the school, and the larger socioeconomic structure. Especially during the fourth year, interviewees were sensitive to perceived social changes and to the inability of the public school setting to adapt to new social needs. In this sense, the school, and not the student, is at risk in its inability to meet new societal demands. Informants discussed the effects external socioecomic factors have on the school environment and on students' academic performance. Identifying students at risk no longer focusses on a type of student in a particular situation, because any student can now be in a situation that puts them at risk. At risk is a situation no longer exclusive to the poor, the minorities, and the low achievers; most adolescents can be at risk.

> *If you say (sic) what characterizes much of the home life of these kids,... it is chaos... where there is a lot more randomness...We have become overwhelmed... Look at the things that we have talked about here. I have physically ill counselors! You know where we are? We are in a survival type of situation!*
>
> Principal

Policy outcomes cannot be evaluated independent of either the way the policies are implemented or the interventions provided for students. School districts are required to provide academic options and services to students identified as being at risk in their current situation.

Recommendations

- Continue to analyze the concept of students at risk to improve its usefulness in directing limited education resources.
- Provide school districts greater discretion in directing resources and services to students by making the state at-risk criteria optional.
- Continue to provide technical support and training to school district staff in effective risk identification and exiting practices.
- Continue to closely monitor the differential impact of state-level policies on students at risk versus other students.
- Continue to emphasize remedial and compensatory programs that accelerate instruction.

The types of services provided may include alternative education programs, retention, counseling, peer tutoring, or referral to service providers outside the school.

Interviews with school staff and faculty indicate that they operate from a model in which they could serve more students at risk and better serve them if only they had more resources, personnel, money, and time. The issue of whether more resources will result in higher graduation rates is being debated nationally. More resources, such as more counselors, would likely result in better services for some students. However, it is clear that there are some

students who would not benefit from increases that provide more of the same. The longitudinal and case study interviews reflect that most remediation services are designed under the prevalent social integration cultural framework. Of the sample of students in the longitudinal component, those who dropped out (year 4) disproportionately represent non-majority cultures of the state.

The study suggests that the types of interventions provided could be a mediating factor in the impact of the policies on students at risk. Remedial programs were found to have the desired effect on achievement as measured by grade point average (GPA) for students at risk who had not failed grades or been retained. There was a significant association between failing grades or having been retained by the second year of the longitudinal study and dropping out in the third or fourth year. Students enrolled in enrichment programs during the second year of the study were less likely to drop out during the third and fourth year than students not enrolled in those programs.

Increased Graduation Requirements

In 1984, based on legislation passed in 1981, the State Board of Education approved increased graduation requirements that included four units of English, two and one-half units of social studies, three units of mathematics, two units of science, one-half unit each of health and economics, one and one-half units of physical education, and seven units of electives. A more rigorous grading system and the implementation of a statewide curriculum identifying essential elements to be learned was also included.

FINDINGS

Principal Survey Component

A large majority (71 percent) of the principals surveyed believed that the increased graduation requirements have had no impact on the probability of regular students graduating from high school. About half (49 percent) of the principals answering the survey felt that students in situations that put them at risk of failing or dropping out of school have been negatively affected by increased graduation requirements. They are unable to pass regular courses or are transferred into Correlated Language Arts or Fundamentals of Mathematics courses that do not adequately prepare them to master the TAAS examination. Only 13 percent of the principals perceived that the reforms have increased the chances of students at risk obtaining a high school diploma.

Longitudinal Component

Among students in the longitudinal sample, neither achievement test scores, rate of earning course credits, nor grade point averages have improved over time. This was true for all four years of this study component. Fifty-two percent of the students in the sample did not earn enough credits to advance to the next grade level in the 1989-90 school year. This percentage dropped to 19 percent for the 1990-91 school year. In 1991-92 the percentage was 10 percent for those students who remained in school.

For students who dropped out in the third and fourth years of the study, there was a significant association between their losing course credit in the second year of the study and dropping out. This suggests that loss of course credit is not having the desired outcome of increasing the motivation to stay in school and work harder.

Case Study Component

Interview data from the case study component suggest that increased graduation requirements have not served to engage or motivate students at risk. School professionals reported that, in many cases, more stringent requirements have served to push the already marginal students even further away from graduation. Increasing academic expectations and raising standards of student performance must be planned in conjunction with additional services such as tutorials, more counselors, day care, transportation, health services, and smaller class sizes and support systems that will assist in meeting the original objective. Raising standards at the state level will not, in and of itself, improve student achievement at the local level.

So it's not going to be good. We're not getting the chance — I don't know — the class of '90 had. It's going to be hard for us. What now? What did we do wrong... It's a lot of pressure to put on us... it's more load on your back, it's a lot... Don't scare us like that! Hey, give us a chance!

Student

Maybe when the standards were changed someone needed to stop and evaluate what classes students had actually taken, because we have students in this current junior class who basically have taken only basic education courses, and then had difficulty in math and as a junior math requirement, these students have taken Fundamentals of Math, Consumer Math, and Pre-Algebra. Yes, they will not have seen a lot of information on the TAAS test.

Counselor

Recommendations

- Provide instructional and support programs in elementary and middle school to ensure that all students enter high school adequately prepared to engage in high school level course work.

- Promote restructuring efforts that give schools the flexibility to meet individual learning needs and increase student interest with innovative methods and course sequences.

That's what we teach in remediation, is test-taking skills. You can't teach them the material. They either know it or they don't. You teach them how to take a test... The ones that don't know the material are failing their classes. From a counselor's point of view, that's what I see. The ones that don't know the material and fail TAAS, fail classes. And so they will not get through the system.

Counselor

The No Pass/No Play Policy

The no pass / no play policy requires students to pass every course during a six-week grading period in order to participate in any extracurricular activity during the following six-week grading period. The policy permits the campus principal to waive the suspension for a student who fails a recognized honors or advanced class.

FINDINGS

Principal Survey Component

A majority (57 percent) of principals reported that the reforms have not reduced regular students' extracurricular participation. Principals perceived the reforms as having the reverse effect on students identified as at risk of failing or dropping out than on regular students. Half of the respondents agreed that the reforms have reduced participation in extracurricular activities by students at risk.

The majority (60 percent) of respondents perceived the no pass/no play policy as having no impact on the probability of regular students graduating from high school. A small percentage (15 percent) felt the rule has decreased the chances for regular students graduating and about one quarter (24 percent) reported the rule has increased the likelihood of regular students graduating from high school.

Forty percent of the principals believed the no pass/no play policy has decreased the likelihood that students at risk will graduate from high school, although a similar percentage of respondents felt the policy has not affected the probability of graduation for students at risk.

Longitudinal Component

Eighty percent of students in the longitudinal sample participated in extracurricular activities at one time or another since the 1988-89 school year. Approximately 40 percent of the students lost eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities each year of the study. Of those students in the sample who lost eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities during the 1990-91 school year, approximately 52 percent lost eligibility for one six-week grading period; 37 percent lost eligibility for two to four grading periods; and the remaining 11 percent lost eligibility for five or more six-week grading periods. About half (51 percent) of the students losing eligibility to participate each year reported that they were able to resume participation once eligibility was restored.

No difference was observed between the percentage of students who lost eligibility to participate in athletics and the percentage who lost eligibility to participate in fine arts activities. A smaller percentage of students in science and foreign language-related activities lost eligibility compared to students participating in athletics and music or fine arts activities.

Students involved in extracurricular activities or in doing homework were less likely to drop out and more likely to have better grades than students who did not participate in these school-related activities. Although students at risk were more likely to lose eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities than regular students, this had no significant effect on whether they dropped out or not.

Case Study Component

School professionals and students expressed strong opinions regarding the no pass/no play policy and the impact it had on their campuses. Overall, the interview data from all four years were very consistent. The majority of school professionals interviewed welcomed and supported the spirit of the policy. Most supported the policy and wanted it to remain in effect, but wanted to shorten the length of time that students must stay out of participation. The professionals also reported that the rule had a differential impact on regular students and students at risk.

Interviews with campus administrators revealed concern about a potential connection between the no pass/no play policy and gang recruitment. Many students' major involvement with school and its source of personal meaning comes from extracurricular activities. This need for affiliation by students is an important factor in their continuing in school and being successful. When this bond is broken, there may be a greater likelihood of being recruited into a gang.

I don't know how to change it. I think that it is a good rule. I like the idea of saying, 'Well, you have got to pass in order to play.' But it hurts me to enforce it. I don't know of a way to change it... we are losing a lot of kids because of the policy. Junior high is where we begin to lose kids... they don't know what a six weeks is. You know, that's a lifetime to them, and if this kid who's only interested in basketball goes on no pass/no play for six weeks, that's the entire season, and he loses. He may well lose the one thing that is really, really keeping him in school... So no pass/no play, although I realize there needs to be some, some well the motivation is an internal motivation. But these, sometimes kids need external motivation to get internally motivated... but not punitive. And I, if there has to be some kind of probation, I'd be much more inclined to like it for three weeks, from a report card to a progress report type period, so that if that kid pulls himself up, at least he's got some immediate kinds of motivation to do it.

Principal

Recommendation

■ Provide opportunities for all students to participate in activities that promote affiliation with the school.

Attendance Policy

Texas students are required to attend class at least 90 percent of the days the class is offered to receive course credit. The attendance law also directs each district to appoint at least one attendance committee to hear petitions for course credit from students with less than the required number of days of attendance. Local school boards must adopt policies that establish alternatives for students to recoup credit lost due to absences and to develop guidelines, based on State Board of Education rules, that define extenuating circumstances.

FINDINGS

Principal Survey Component

Approximately one-third (36 percent) of the principals responding to the 1990 survey perceived that the attendance policy has increased the likelihood of regular students graduating from high school. The majority of principals (57 percent) believed the attendance policy has had no affect on regular students graduating from high school. Less than ten percent believed the policy has decreased the likelihood of regular students graduating. Thirty-five percent of the principals believed the attendance policy has increased the probability of high school completion for students who are in situations that put them at risk of failing or dropping out, 38 percent were neutral, and 27 percent believed the policy has decreased the probability of high school completion by students at risk.

Longitudinal Component

Approximately 14 percent of students in the longitudinal sample lost credit due to the attendance policy during the 1990-91 school year. This percentage represents a slight increase from the first year of the study (10 percent) when the five-day absence policy was in effect. During the 1991-92 school year approximately 10 percent of the students still enrolled in school lost credit due to the attendance policy. Students who lost credit during the second year of the study were not as likely to have high academic performance during the third and fourth years as those who did not lose credit, suggesting that the policy does not motivate students to higher achievement. The study found that losing course credit toward the end of high school is more detrimental to student achievement than experiencing this penalty earlier.

Fifty-five percent of the students who reported losing credit for a course due to the attendance policy petitioned the attendance committee for credit. Of these, 46 percent said they were granted credit. The four most common reasons reported by students for missing school were:

Did not feel like going to school	22%
Went somewhere with family	20%
Had to take care of family or friend, other than my child	13%
Got bored with school	11%

Case Study Component

Interview data indicate that students who are already tuned out and alienated, those with family or work responsibility, and those with dysfunctional family lives, were most affected by the attendance policy. Even with excused absences, these students may be absent enough to not master a subject. Interviewees observed an emergent pattern of the attendance policy increasing the possibility of course failure for some students. Failure in a course early in the school year precludes taking the course until the following year. Most students in such a

situation give up and leave school, either temporarily or permanently. Awareness of this pattern exists and counselors, teachers, and principals report actively trying to intervene. The major obstacles to their success were identified as (1) student to counselor ratios as high as 500 to 1 or more and (2) an increase in paperwork, which was seen as unproductive and discouraging.

Most of those interviewed, including those opposing the existing attendance policy, favor the notion of a minimum mandatory attendance. There is, however, a perceived need for greater local discretion and flexibility in implementation of the attendance policy. Modifications were suggested in the number of absences allowed, how the petition process and attendance committees function, and consequences for students with excessive absences.

Oh! It's terrible! The only thing that the 80 day rule has resulted in is paperwork. Has not increased students' attendance at all... Now, hopefully some of those kids are going to buy back that time by coming to school on Saturdays. But really, it has not given them that sense of responsibility.

Teacher

Recommendation

■ Develop flexible and locally appropriate means of recovering credit for students with excessive absences, emphasizing learning outcomes and recuperating work as opposed to making up the time lost.

It's frustrating! When the attendance policy was first implemented, I was in the classroom. And I was delighted to think that there is going to be some teeth in getting these kids to school. I have not found it to have any teeth... So, and as a counselor, I find it the same way. I find it frustrating. Attendance is frustrating!... In every area ... the students need to be here. Oh, I don't know, the very ones who need to be here are the ones who are absent the most.

Counselor

TEAMS/TAAS Exit-Level Examination

House Bill 72 required students to take basic skills tests at every other grade level and required passage of an exit-level examination for graduation. At the beginning of the 1990-91 school year, the student testing program was changed from the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimal Skills (TEAMS) to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which includes assessment of higher-order thinking skills. By the 1994-95 school year, tests in science and social studies are scheduled to have been phased into the TAAS criterion-referenced testing program.

FINDINGS

Principal Survey Component

The introduction of the statewide testing program was seen by principals as positive overall by raising standards, helping teachers assess students' needs, and triggering remediation for students performing below grade level. In 1990-91 principals were more concerned about ninth grade failures than the exit-level test. While the majority of high school principals (66 percent) felt the TEAMS exit-level examination had no impact on regular students, approximately 16 percent felt it decreased the probability of regular students graduating from high school. For students identified as being at risk of school failure or dropping out, however, the majority (55 percent) of principals believed that the exit-level examination decreased the probability of graduation. About one-third (32 percent) felt that the exit-level examination had no impact on students at risk.

Longitudinal Component

Data from the longitudinal component show that students who failed the TEAMS/TAAS were more likely to drop out than were students who did not fail, and that dropouts have lower TAAS mastery (50 percent) than do students who graduated (64 percent). Students who, according to their counselors, met only one or two risk factors believed to affect the probability of graduation from high school were significantly more likely to pass the 11th grade TAAS than were students whose counselors said they met three or more risk factors (61 percent versus 36 percent).

Case Study Component

Teachers and other school professionals saw in the TAAS a confusion between setting expectations for students and assessing them. They saw the TAAS as abusive when they were unable to waive it for students who had met all the other requirements for graduation yet not been able to pass the TAAS. Interviewees called for multiple assessment. Many felt a single test should not exercise so much influence on graduation. Most wanted graduation portfolios that would give several-year-long perspectives of the students' work in a variety of areas. They expressed the perception that there is too much emphasis on the TAAS and not enough on quality learning and instruction. Administering the TAAS has become an increasingly time-consuming task.

> *Whose duty is the welfare and the wellbeing of students? We have no time to spend with students, to perhaps relieve some of the difficulties they are having, so they could learn, they could process, they could master. We can't do that because we are involved in a testing process that... Hang on and watch the calendar for next*

year. Because what you are going to be doing is unboxing, all year long. That's the way got (sic)... the way the state in its infinite wisdom set the testing calendar.

Counselor

...Just because they passed the exit level test doesn't mean they're not going to have a bunch of idiots running around... They already do.

Student

It's like someone at the job, and they've been working all year, and they finally get no paycheck, and they say, 'Wait a second, you have to do this big thing or else you don't get any paychecks.' We've *done all this work, and now it's all down to this test!*

Student

Recommendation

■ Provide longer implementation periods for policy initiatives that have student consequences such as eligibility to receive a diploma, and incorporate institutional accountability measures into the Academic Excellence Indicator System and performance-based accreditation process before holding students accountable for achieving outcomes.

Driver's License Law

To receive a driver's license, anyone under 18 who does not have a high school diploma or its equivalent must be enrolled in school and have attended school for at least 80 days in the fall or spring semester preceding their application for a license,or be enrolled in a high school equivalency program and have been enrolled for at least 45 days.

FINDINGS

Principal Survey Component

Thirty-two percent of the principals surveyed perceived that the driver's license law has increased the likelihood of regular students completing high school; the majority (67 percent) responded that it has had no impact on regular students. The responses were very similar for students in situations that put them at risk of school failure or dropping out. While about 38 percent of principals believed the law has increased the probability of students at risk completing high school, over half (58 percent) believe it has had no impact. Only five percent believed the law will decrease the probability of students at risk graduating from high school.

Longitudinal Component

Seventy-nine percent of the students in the sample were aware of the driver's license law by the fourth year (1991-92) of the longitudinal study compared to 70 percent in 1990-91 and only 52 percent in 1989-90. Approximately 60 percent of the students thought this law helped prevent students from dropping out.

Case Study Component

All four years of the study have found this law to be judged largely ineffective by the professionals interviewed; that is, to have brought about no improvement in the likelihood of students graduating from high school.

These findings are insufficient for a recommendation to either change or repeal the driver's license law.

I don't know what happened to that. We've had no information on whether it is working or not... I don't think that it stops kids from driving... and I think a lot of kids drive without a license.

Teacher

It ain't going to stop me.

Student

But now I find that more find a way to get around it. And, I've had others that they just don't care. And, then too, we have others that are attending school for the sole purpose of being eligible for a driver's license and things like that, but I don't see the motivation to achieve. They are just here.

Counselor

CONCLUSION

Policy Implications

The Texas education reforms, as well as the nationwide educational improvement effort, reflects a perceived need for social structural change. A sense of crisis pervades the perception that not only our youth are at risk, but the nation itself. How the educational system is responding to the changing needs and new demands of society today is a crucial policy issue. Research shows that it is extremely difficult for policy to change practice at the local level. The relationship between policy and local-level behavior is multidimensional and dynamic in nature. It is the local school district and campus interpretation and implementation of policy that defines outcome. Local level change is a product of local level factors, many times beyond the control of state-mandated policies. The challenge is that local factors fluctuate over time, creating a dynamic decision-making setting. Well-intended laws do not necessarily work well when translated at the local school setting.

Implications for educational policy reforms aimed at specific elements of the education system are tremendous. The dominance of local variability added to the dynamic nature of the local environment make policies that focus on single issues and single inputs very difficult to implement because, by definition, they exclude the diverse conditions found at the classroom level. Educational reform has been found to be typically directed towards removing or fixing the problem through short-term, crisis-oriented intervention. To be effective at the local level, variability needs to be taken into account and reform needs to be ongoing. Policy research calls for looking beyond the formal policy structure to promote and stimulate change. Studies suggest that effective policy strategies use locally existing networks, such as teacher/parent associations, as change vehicles rather than using policy delivery channels derived from a centralized decision-making structure. Furthermore, the policy-making process should be a cooperative effort between all levels involved.

In addition to the policy-specific recommendations listed above, a series of more general recommendations are included at the end of this report. Unfortunately, evidence to date leads to the disturbing prediction that, if implementation of the policies continues in its current form, it is likely that there will be a significant number of students who will not graduate.

General Recommendations

The following recommendations are sensitive to the overall direction of the agency in promoting excellence and equity in education by shifting its emphasis from a regulatory role to one of partnership and instructional leadership with school districts. Current efforts at the state level such as the introduction of performance-based accountability, the Partnership Schools Initiative, and adoption of the Policy Statement on Middle Grade Education and Middle Grade Schools and Policy Statement on High School Education, reflect a movement towards site-based decision making by increasing local control and fostering partnership efforts. The state needs to place even more emphasis on facilitating local level decision making.

Through the State Board of Education policy statements, local-level initiatives in a developmental framework and perspective that is sensitive to, and respectful of, the nature of adolescence, need to occur. These should be based on pedagogically sound principles; and integrate community effort involving business, health, social, and other community service organizations in responding to the needs of developing youth.

- Develop a formal process for periodically reconsidering reform policies so that reform can become ongoing.

- Foster efforts that give local flexibility to schools with high proportions of students at risk to best meet the needs of these students.

- Examine the multiple roles of counselors and identify duties that may interfere with the time needed to provide developmentally appropriate counseling services to students.

- Link instructional services with support services such as counseling, transportation, health services, day care, and tutoring for students at risk of dropping out of school.

- Provide staff development for high school staff that increases their knowledge and use of developmentally appropriate practices through implementation of the recommendations for professional growth and development from the State Board of Education Task Force on High School Education.

COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 AS AMENDED; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED; AMERICAN DISABILITIES ACT OF 1990; AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1991.

The Texas Education Agency shall comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all Federal and State laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any educational programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status or a disability requiring accommodation (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency is an Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer.

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